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SUBJECT: LONG-TIME AKP-ER HAS WEATHERED THE STORMS, DEBATES
U.S. SUPERPOWER

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A Wiener for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Nureddin Nebati, a leading businessman associated with religiously-tied Independent Industrialists and Businessmen's Association (MUSIAD) and a founding member of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) Istanbul branch, along with AKP's Istanbul Deputy Chairman of Economic Affairs Malih Bulu, an associate professor at Bogazici University, discussed with us the founding of the AKP and Turkish views of U.S. Nebati led us through the AKP's winding history, warned of continuing negative Turkish public opinion of the U.S., and shared his pessimistic evaluation of the U.S. standing as the world's only superpower. Nebati, who has weathered two party closures with Recep Tayyip Erdogan and other key party members, suggested Erdogan realized the folly of rigid adherence to traditional Islamist party doctrine and adjusted ideology in founding the AKP to incorporate ideas representative of the wider Turkish public. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Nureddin Nebati owns a successful high-class children's clothing business and has seen the AKP through its ups and downs. He lightheartedly described the time when he was named a founding member of the Istanbul branch. Although he was honored, it came as a surprise because he thought of himself as a founding father on the national level. Rubbing a hand over his short well-groomed beard, he blamed his facial hair. When everyone in his previous party affiliations sported traditional beards, he had stayed clean-shaven. Now, when the party eschews beards to avoid suspicions of fundamentalist agendas, Nebati does not shave.

AKP - From Ideologues to Compromisers

¶3. (C) Nebati described the evolution of the AKP, from its roots as a reformist element in the Welfare (Refah) Party (RP), through several forced closures, to its current incarnation. Recalling the closure of AKP's first predecessor party, the Welfare Party (RP), Nebati smiled, saying he "wept" when the decision came out. He explained that RP members followed Necmettim Erbakan's idealistic lead unquestioningly, even promoting Islamic and anti-Western views. One word from Erbakan after the court closed the RP would have sent party members and supporters "into the streets," ready to die for Erbakan's ideals. Thankfully for Nebati, Erbakan did not incite his supporters to riot. When the RP's successor, the Virtue Party, was also shut down, Nebati said he was hardly fazed. He had been through it before and knew what to do to get back on track, hence the AKP.

¶4. (C) According to Nebati, both Erbakan and AKP party

leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan actively recruited intellectuals and leading figures with differing views to secure a broader support base and counter fears of an Islamist movement. However, Nebati claimed Erbakan's recruitment was only "for show," while he maintained strict control of the party's ideology. Although Erdogan's strategy started out the same, Nebati told us Erdogan realized the broader views and the proposals they precipitated were what "the people wanted." Erdogan and some AKP members, a group in which Nebati put himself, decided that compromising on ideological issues and abandoning harder lines to meet public demand was the direction the AKP needed to take. Those unwilling to make concessions to please the public broke into a fringe party (Saadet) that stayed closer to Erbakan, while those willing to compromise led AKP to become successful and popular, Nebati explained.

----- Polls and Perspectives

15. (C) Bogazici University associate professor Malih Bulu predicted that a poll taken of Turkish views of the U.S. now would reflect around 30% approval (up from 9% in the last poll) because of the intelligence sharing agreements and U.S. support for Turkey's recent cross border operation. Nebati contradicted him almost immediately, arguing that Turks' negative opinion of the U.S. is deep-rooted. Turkish disapproval of the U.S. stems from USG policies concerning the Palestinians, Afghanistan and Iraq, coupled with a perception that Americans view Islam negatively. These opinions have not changed, Nebati asserted, and outweigh most positive effects that Bulu mentioned. Moreover, Nebati insisted that Turks want the USG to take responsibility for Iraq and Afghanistan, including the "million" deaths in Iraq.

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16. (C) Nebati criticized American diplomats of the past and foreign reporters, accusing them of listening to the opinions of the secular, urban elite, and systematically ignoring the non-urban, pious Turkish majority. Diplomats had failed to capture the reality of Turkey, and were thus surprised by the polls' overwhelmingly negative results, when they should have known better. Efforts to learn more about the Iranian diaspora in Turkey will have similarly skewed results, Nebati argued, because that community represents only those Iranians opposed to the current government in Tehran.

A Hidden Agenda -----

17. (C) Nebati told us negativity towards the U.S. is also fed by a widespread perception in Turkey that the USG is pulling the strings for selfish benefit, in Turkey and around the world. According to Nebati, one theory on the USG's "hidden agenda" speculates that current friendliness towards Turkey is a ruse designed to gain Turkey's trust so the USG can more easily pursue secret pro-Israel and pro-"Kurdistan" goals. Carving a "Kurdistan" out of Turkey would only be one step on the path, according to this conspiracy, because the final vision is a "greater Israel," encompassing all the land from Israel to Mesopotamia. This theory is one that Erbakan is known to have promoted during his heyday. Yildirim joked that the Turk on the street is renowned for blaming the U.S. for anything from government quarrels to earthquakes. Nebati gently but firmly maintained that the USG's perceived omnipresence should not be so easily dismissed.

18. (C) Bulu responded that he was no longer convinced the USG is focused on taking over Turkey or that U.S. policy makers even place much importance on Turkey. Time he spent in Washington, DC "shocked" him; officials in Washington and the governors of Mississippi and Minnesota knew little, if anything, about Turkey. Many misconceptions exist about U.S. interest in Turkey, he said, urging the U.S. to reach out to Turks with the truth. False impressions are so widespread in

Turkey that they are often accepted without second thought, he warned. While Nebati did not comment on his colleague's statements about his disillusionment in Washington, he did agree that the U.S. must work to counteract widespread misunderstandings, saying that perceptions are important, even if they are not ultimately accurate.

Superpower or Failing Power

¶9. (C) Bulu discussed a version of the Hegemonic Stability Theory, claiming the world had experienced unprecedented peace while the U.S. has been the only superpower. He said the world would be in for huge economic and political shocks and even "World War Three" if the U.S. loses its sole superpower standing. Bulu advocated that Turkey and other countries work to support the U.S. and the dollar because their economic and social wellbeing is tied to U.S. stability. Bulu dismissed Russia's importance as a rising power, calling it the "second Saudi Arabia" with little or no manufacturing base.

¶10. (C) Nebati, on the other hand, compared the world power structure to a seesaw on which the balance is changing. The U.S. will not be able to hover at the high end as the unchallenged superpower for much longer, he cautioned with a smile. The only choice Nebati saw for the U.S. is whether to come down slowly or painfully fast because Russia, China, and India are rushing to overtake U.S. power. He told us Turkey is actively expanding its influence in Asia and Africa to better position itself in the post-U.S. superpower world order. Bulu, on the other hand, predicted that if the U.S. works closely with Turkey, there will be numerous opportunities to develop "win-win" situations, suggesting that a resurgence of Ottoman-style Turkish influence in the region could also bring stability to the former Ottoman territories of the Middle East, Balkans, and Central Asia.

¶11. (C) Comment. Throughout the meeting, Nebati was pleasant, eloquent, and at ease, even when he rattled off conspiracy theories and predicted a U.S. fall from power. His effortless familiarity with the AKP, as demonstrated by the names he dropped, and the deference the other participants in the conversation showed him gave the impression that he has significant influence in the AKP, despite holding no major position. End comment.

WIENER